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STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

Inter-agency Task Force on Environment Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Inter-agency Task Force on Environment Statistics (Convener: United Nations Statistical Division), which is contained in the annex. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its sixteenth session (Geneva, 13-16 September 1993) (E/CN.3/1994/2, para. 11).

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* E/CN.3/1994/1.

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Annex

REPORT OF THE INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE ON ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

1. The Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, at its sixteenth session (Geneva, 13-16 September 1993), expressed its satisfaction with the work of the Task Force on Environment Statistics. It welcomed the results of a survey of international activities in the fields of environmental statistics and accounting carried out by the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT) in its capacity as the Convener of the Task Force on Environment Statistics. The results of that survey had been described in a background paper made available to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-seventh session.

2. The Working Group recommended that the work of the Task Force on Environment Statistics be kept in step with the work on national accounts, especially the work on environmental accounting. The Working Group also considered that it was especially important to set priorities among the goals of the Task Force. The report of the Task Force to the Working Group at its sixteenth session (E/CN.3/AC.1/1993/R.8, sect. IV) will be made available as a background document.

3. In response to the request of the Working Group that the task forces evaluate their mandates, achievements and future work, a core group of the Task Force on Environment Statistics was convened by UNSTAT under the auspices of the joint United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/UNSTAT Consultative Expert Group Meeting on Environmental and Sustainable Development Indicators (Geneva, 6-8 December 1993). The report of the core group is contained in the appendix. The report of the Consultative Expert Group Meeting will also be made available as a background document.

4. There was a general consensus among the members of the core group that it would be useful to organize work along cross-cutting themes. Since environmental statistics, indicators and accounting are inter-connected, priorities for the work of the Task Force were not set; instead it was felt that the informal subgroups of the Consultative Expert Group in such areas as the development of data and Earthwatch/Development Watch could usefully address the various concerns in environmental statistics, indicators and accounting. Given the financial constraints that agencies were facing, it was agreed that the Task Force and/or its core group should not physically meet unless there was a particularly difficult issue that needed to be clarified or discussed in ad hoc meetings of informal working groups. It was suggested that electronic networking and other means of communication should be used as much as possible in order to avoid the costs of actual meetings.

5. However, out of concern that the number of agencies participating in the core group was limited and that the group largely consisted of environmental specialists, the conclusions of the core group were circulated to all Task Force members with a request to (a) clarify how the Task Force perceived its mandate; (b) evaluate its methods and achievements to date and its prospects for future success; and (c) set priorities among its goals.

6. The responses received from the Task Force members expressed general agreement with the terms of reference of the Task Force. A few particular points were raised concerning the overall work of the Task Force. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was of the opinion that it was the user community that had the primary responsibility for defining the key environmental indicators needed; based on those needs, statistical organizations could then define data requirements and determine how they were to be collected and compiled. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) suggested that regional banks, such as the Asian Development Bank, be involved in the work of the Task Force, even though their physical participation in meetings at the international level might not always be possible. The World Bank felt that, judging by discussions at the above-mentioned Expert Group Meeting, the work of the Task Force should be in advance of, rather than merely in step with, work on national accounts, especially work on environmental accounting.

7. With regard to paragraph 5, subparagraph (a) above, the following organizations offered specific comments on the issue. The Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat) was of the opinion that the Task Force mandate should operate mainly at the level of (a) the interchange of information on programmes and priorities and (b) the allocation of the primary responsibility for development in each area to the agencies with the interest, competence and resources to take action. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) made a distinction between conceptual work, data work and methodological discussions. ECE stressed that data work required a major coordination effort and that the first results of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environmental Data should be the basis for the further work of the Task Force in that area.

8. With regard to priorities in the work of the Task Force, there was a general consensus in favour of the schedule described below.

In the short term (1994-1995)

1. Develop concepts and methods in environment statistics (in-depth studies of selected areas), environmental indicators (policy-oriented and forward-looking indicators, projections, scenario analyses and models, as well as subnational and local indicators in parallel to the national-level approach) and integrated environmental and economic accounting, possibly by establishing one or more core groups of the Task Force.

2. Support technical cooperation by organizing country projects, training seminars or workshops with a view to building the capacity of developing countries and countries in transition in the above-mentioned areas.

3. Compile a directory of environmental data (currently being prepared by UNSTAT in collaboration with UNEP-Harmonization of Environmental Measurement (HEM), based on the UNSTAT survey of country practices in environment statistics and on the UNEP-HEM survey of organizations concerned with environment statistics, both carried out in 1993).

4. Further improve software for integrated environmental and economic accounting through testing in country projects (based on the software already developed by UNSTAT and tested in the Mexico case-study on integrated environmental and economic accounting in 1991).

5. Compile and disseminate selected environmental indicators.

In the medium term (by 1997)

Further develop and revise concepts and methods in environment statistics, environmental indicators and integrated environmental and economic accounting, based on country projects, training seminars and workshops.

In the long term (beyond 1997)

Collect, process and disseminate environment statistics for an international compendium of environment statistics.

9. With regard to setting priorities, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was of the view that the most urgent task was to set priorities among the various statistical approaches to the environment. Two approaches were outlined by the IMF, a physical approach and an economic approach. Since physical indicators constituted a crucial building block for the economic approach and the economic approach would in turn build on and incorporate work on physical indicators, the IMF proposed the schedule described below.

In the short term (1994-1995)

1. Further develop and select a set of physical environmental indicators.

2. Promote the collection of the statistical data required to compile physical indicators as well as the actual compilation of those indicators.

3. Compile and disseminate selected physical environmental indicators.

4. Further develop techniques for linking physical indicators to national accounts.

In the medium term (by 1997)

1. Present physical indicators in a national accounting framework.

2. Compile a directory of environmental data.

3. Investigate possibilities for expressing environmental statistics in monetary values.

In the long term (beyond 1997)

1. Collect, process and disseminate physical environmental indicators in a national accounts framework for an international compendium of environmental statistics.

2. Develop environmental statistics in monetary values (if possible).

Appendix

REPORT OF THE CORE GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS AS OF THE UNEP/UNSTAT CONSULTATIVE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS (Geneva, 6-8 December 1993)

1. The representative of UNSTAT, who chaired the session on the Task Force, explained the dual function of the UNEP/UNSTAT Consultative Expert Group Meeting on Environmental and Sustainable Development Indicators as (a) an expert group on environmental indicators and indicators of sustainable development and (b) a core group on indicators of the Task Force on Environment Statistics. Relevant results of the discussion of the Expert Group Meeting would be incorporated in the report of the Task Force to the Statistical Commission at its special session in April 1994.

2. The Chairman provided an overview of the past work of the Task Force and referred to the request of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, at its sixteenth session, that the mandates, priorities and terms of reference for future work of the Task Force be clarified.

3. The Consultative Expert Group agreed to continue its work, which would enable it to respond to the requests of intergovernmental bodies, such as the Statistical Commission. The core group on environmental indicators of the Task Force on Environment Statistics therefore suggested that issues concerning environment statistics, indicators and accounting could be usefully addressed by the informal subgroups of the Consultative Expert Group, notably those dealing with the development of data and Earthwatch/Development Watch. Electronic networking and other means of communication should be used as much as possible to avoid the costs of actual meetings.